

Academic Leadership and the Course Coordinator: 'King Pin' in the Quality Process

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Abstract

Quality teaching and learning are becoming critical priorities for Universities as these outcomes are increasingly being linked to funding, ranking and reputation. Course coordinators are a key player in the quality process because of their leadership role in managing, developing and running university courses. The decisions and actions they take have a large influence on student performance, feedback, learning outcomes, and overall course quality. Course coordinators, however, often find themselves in these positions because of their strengths in their academic discipline. They are often ill prepared for the leadership and quality monitoring requirements of this role. This paper reports on a survey conducted within a large metropolitan university to ascertain the development needs of course coordinators. The results indicate that this group are uncertain about the scope of their role and would be well served by clear duty statements. They are time poor and need development in two focal areas. The first need is building and leading academic teams in order to build positive work cultures. The second need is improving their knowledge of quality curriculum design, development and evaluation using an outcomes framework and the link to assessment. The implications of this survey suggest that academic developers need to provide training opportunities for this critical cohort of academic leaders. University management must also develop clearer role descriptions for this group of staff and consider recognition of their leadership efforts in promotion system.

Keywords: Academic Leadership, Quality, Course Coordinator

1. Introduction

Quality teaching and learning are increasingly becoming an institutional priority for universities. Whilst quality is often measured at the unit level by examining student feedback and performance, course level feedback is equally as important. Course coordinators (also known as program or degree coordinators) carry much of the leadership responsibility for ensuring that courses are of high quality and relevant to industry.

2. The Course Coordinator

Course coordinators (CCs) are academic leaders who tend to be highly competent and qualified academics who, by virtue of their accomplishments, advance to the role of managing and leading a university course (Yielder & Codling, 2004). One reason that these individuals may move into these roles is their commitment to the organization (Murphy, 2003) and the potential intrinsic and extrinsic rewards associated with this role such as personal satisfaction, higher status, salary and career advancement.

Frequently, however, these academics are ill-prepared for such a leadership role, given that they have focused their academic pursuits on developing their discipline expertise rather than on leadership and the scholarship of teaching and learning. Further, understanding of the course coordinator role is often ill-defined, leaving individuals uncertain about their responsibilities (Briggs, 2001).

Course coordinators are vested with considerable academic, managerial and administrative responsibility for achieving the desired quality and credibility of course teaching and learning outcomes. This responsibility, however, is often accompanied with limited line management authority which makes implementation of ideas and actions difficult.

The Course Coordinator position is also viewed as an all-consuming, complex and demanding role with significant stress (Murphy, 2003). It is often seen to have an adverse impact on personal teaching, research and scholarly activity (Carroll & Wolverton, 2004). Currently there is little support within

Australian universities to prepare, support and recognise academics in these crucial academic leadership roles (Parker & Wilson, 2002).

Bennett (1983) has noted the difficulty of moving into an academic leadership role. Individuals must shift from being a specialist to a generalist and an individualist to a collectivist. The academic leaders must also shift their loyalty to their discipline to the loyalty of the institution or course. A diverse set of leadership and quality control capabilities are also required. An ill-prepared course coordinator, therefore, may jeopardize the quality of a course by reducing teaching and learning effectiveness, which in turn may result in lowered university reputation (Wolverton, Ackerman, & Holt, 2005).

Through no fault of their own, Course Coordinators often focus on the managerial or transactional aspects of their role (Antonakis & Hourse, 2002) which, includes planning and budgeting, organising and staffing, course control and monitoring and solving problems. Unfortunately, the leadership or transformational aspect of the role (Antonakis & Hourse, 2002) is often neglected. Ramsden (1998) has noted similar findings in situations where academic leadership is lacking, resulting in an absence or neglect of strategic functions such as setting future directions and aligning people and groups with departmental and organisational goals.

The literature suggests that sound academic leadership ultimately improves student learning. Gibbs (2006) found that if department leaders facilitate a good teaching environment, then teachers are more likely to use a student-focused approach to learning, which in turn results in far superior learning outcomes due to a deep approach to study (Martin et al, 2003; Prosser & Trigwell, 1997). This approach was proposed by Ramsden (1998) who indicated that teaching which focuses primarily on student learning, rather than teacher activity, is best supported by academic leaders who provide clear goals and enable people to embrace change. More effective student performance is achieved when teachers are encouraged to discuss curriculum and teaching issues, and where management is open and collaborative (Prosser & Trigwell, 1997).

3. Academic Leadership

Academic leadership has been analysed alongside conventional leadership theory to ascertain how leadership manifests within the higher education sector. Ramsden (1998) in 'Learning to Lead in Higher Education' summarises many of the leadership issues facing higher education which are still noteworthy today. The sector is facing numerous challenges including swings in student enrolments, greater scrutiny from the community and government with respect to accountability, fiscal challenges, rising consumer demands, advancements in technology and workloads and industrial reform. The need for leadership, as a result, has never been more important. This need for leadership development at the Course Coordinator level must be considered by Universities given the pivotal role these individuals play in ensuring course quality.

Ramsden (1998) notes that effective academic leaders demonstrate leadership in teaching and research, along with the ability to strategically vision and network. They are adept at collaborating and motivating others through their leadership, while being fair and efficient and recognise and develop good performance. They also have good interpersonal skills. This is difficult to achieve in the Course Coordinator role without any formal authority. Hence, the development and management of relationships is critical to this leadership role if outcomes are to be achieved with respect to leading and managing course quality.

In another study Marshall, Adams, & Cameron (2000) interviewed senior academics to ascertain conceptions of 'academic leadership'. There were different conceptions when leaders in formal positions were asked for their ideas in comparison to those in the 'rank and file'. In their review of the literature, Marshall and colleagues found that academic leadership could be viewed as a collection of tasks or functions which are performed by individuals in formal positions within the university. Alternatively, academic leadership could also be described as qualities or characteristics of individuals. What Marshall et al. (2000) describe is not unusual. As they note, the concept of 'academic leadership' is elusive.

In the research described by Marshall et al. (2000) specific dimensions of leadership within the academic environment are described. Those which are particularly relevant to CCs are described below:

- Introducing students to scholarly work.
- Coordinating large course units

- Building community among lecturers, through team building, coaching and mentoring, and involving others in discussions and planning.
- Mentoring younger members of staff.
- Keeping people informed of progress.
- Being available and being generous with time and expertise and building trust.
- Being supportive of staff by valuing what they do and seeing differences as positive, and coaching them to work better, but also having the courage to give positive and critical feedback.

Gaither (2004) also summarises some major findings on leadership within the academic context. Leadership is not connected to title and position, but is invested in behaviour. Academic leadership is much more interdependent than individualistic because of the people-centred nature of the organisation. Building and maintaining relationships across the system is critical to leadership success, particularly in the CC role given its lack of formal authority. Gaither (2004) and Murphy (2003) both note that academic leadership is about sharing power and authority which is very much in line with transformational leadership theory. Leadership is also contextual which parallels views of contingency leadership theory. Gaither states that extensive knowledge of the University's environment and systems, strategy and culture are essential to leadership. This echoes again for defining the leadership of the course coordinator, who because of a lack of formal authority over others, must create interdependence with their team and share power to invoke change and chart progress.

Taylor (2005, p31) notes that academic leadership is a synergy among variable characteristics of the person, the academic development role, development strategies, and the institutional context. Taylor notes the importance of personal qualities such as communication, empathy, listening, and negotiation along with personal competencies in teaching, learning and academic culture.

There are also specific academic leadership challenges which are particularly noteworthy for course coordinators. Marshall et al. (2000) note several issues that complicate academic leadership. One particular challenge is lack of control over resources and the ability to make decisions. A second challenge is inherent in the blurring of hierarchical relationships, which are usually clear in corporate sectors, but fuzzy in academic settings. Colleagues typically want collaborative working relationships but do not comply readily with being led or supervised. Lastly, Marshall and colleagues note that expectations can also be unrealistic, particularly when demands for research, scholarship, and teaching are added to leadership and management responsibilities. Sathye (2004) adds that academic leadership is distinctive from leadership in business or government agencies because individuals, like course coordinators, still must stay close to teaching, learning, research and scholarship to bring out the best in those academics they lead and collaborate. This leaves the CC with many challenges inherent in their role. They play a 'king-pin' role between the Head of School and the course team in leading, directing and managing course developments, all without the vestments of an authoritative position.

Leadership development also seems to suggest it is most successful when it includes opportunities for coaching and mentoring, 360 degree feedback, and discussion and support (Bolden, Gosling, & Petrov, 2006; Raines, 2003). Given the nature of academic leadership and the role of the course coordinator, what development needs are appropriate for this position?

4. Method

A survey was distributed to all CCs at Curtin University of Technology to ascertain their development needs in order to perform their academic leadership role and to inform the structure and delivery of a professional development program for CCs. There were 12 broad areas with options to add open ended comments at the end of the survey. Respondents were required to answer each question using a 5 point Likert Scale. Distribution of the survey was through email as well hard copy follow up. A total of 179 course coordinators were identified in the University, and 48 replied which represents a response rate of 26.8%.

5. Results

Table 1 provides a summary of the results rank ordered by level of priority indicated by the respondents. The top three priorities were providing a positive and supportive environment for the teaching team (78%) followed by establishing and maintaining quality assessment practices in the

course (76%). This was followed by ensuring that the assessment practices align with the unit and course learning outcomes (68%). The next three priorities were all ranked equally (64%), namely, having a clear and consistent understanding of the role and responsibilities of the Course Coordinator, developing a high performance culture within the course team, and student management issues. Course review processes, outcome focussed education frameworks and understanding online learning technologies were ranked seventh to ninth respectively. Understanding course administration and management and career path issues were the lowest priorities for the CCs.

Table 1: Course Coordinator Survey Results

<i>Percentages</i>	Low - - - - Priority - - - - High					Score
	1	2	3	4	5	4+5
Q10: Providing a positive and supportive environment for the teaching team engaged in this course	2	10	10	39	39	78
Q2: Establishing & maintaining – the quality of assessment practices within the course	0	2	22	46	30	76
Q3: Ensuring that the assessment practices align with the unit and course learning outcomes	0	2	30	38	30	68
Q7: Having a clear and consistent understanding of the role and responsibilities of the Course Coordinator	6	10	20	28	36	64
Q4: Developing a high performance culture within the course team	6	6	24	24	40	64
Q6: Student management issues	4	6	26	40	24	64
Q5: Undertaking course reviews to enhance the quality of the course outcomes	4	6	32	32	26	57
Q1: Ensuring appropriate and consistent application of the outcome focused education (OFE) framework	6	16	25	43	10	53
Q12: Understanding of online teaching and learning technologies	14	8	26	42	10	52
Q8: Understand the course management and committee processes	2	16	32	28	22	50
Q9: Understanding the course administrative processes. e.g. enrolment, StudentOne etc.	10	14	36	24	16	40
Q11: Understanding career paths available to you	18	24	28	16	14	30

Specific sub-analyses of the data also revealed some interesting trends. For example, ensuring appropriate and consistent application of the outcomes focussed education framework was considered a higher priority in 63% of undergraduate CCs, as opposed to 44% of post graduate CCs. Female course coordinators were more likely to rank this as a high priority (63%) as opposed to male CCs (37%). The same trend undergraduate/postgraduate and female/male trend was noted for establishing and maintaining quality assessment practices. Undergraduate course coordinators ranked this as a higher priority than postgraduate course coordinators (79 vs 56% respectively). Females also ranked this higher than males (83 vs. 65% respectively).

Males in contrast to females ranked developing a high performance culture within the course team higher (75 vs. 58% respectively). The less experienced course coordinators (0 – 2 years) also put a higher priority on student management issues (89%). This tended to decrease with increasing experience, except in those course coordinators with 11+ years of experience where it increased again. Reasons for this latter phenomenon may be due to increasing complexity of student issues.

Undergraduate course coordinators also ranked having a clear and consistent understanding of the role and responsibilities of the course coordinator higher than postgraduate coordinators (79 vs. 44% respectively). Again, course coordinators with 0 – 2 years of experience also ranked this higher (89%) with decreasing prioritisation amongst more experienced course coordinators, with the exception of those with 11+ years of experience who ranked this higher again. Reasons for this latter phenomenon may be the increasing challenges being placed on individuals in these roles, or perhaps they have taken on coordination roles for more complex courses based on their years of experience.

Understanding the course administrative processes was also ranked considerably higher as a priority in undergraduate course coordinators than postgraduate course coordinators (63 vs 11% respectively). Those with 0 – 2 years of experience also ranked understanding the course administrative process as a high priority relative to those with more experience (67%).

5.1 Summary – Qualitative Data

Course coordinators were also asked for open ended feedback on the three biggest challenges they face in their role. Of the 48 responses received, 40 course coordinators (84%) provided written feedback. Themes that emerged most strongly from the feedback included:

- Coping with the growing number of administrative burdens being allocated to academic staff along with complex internal information systems.
- Prescribing and managing quality assessment practices.
- Reviewing, planning and monitoring course curriculum load, overlap and strategies.
- Ambiguity about the role of the course coordinator, scope of influence, decision making power.
- Finding the time to manage the myriad of student issues and to provide a quality service and as well as finding the resources to support student needs.
- Supporting staff, managing non-compliant staff, and trying to build a high performance team
- Lack of time to complete responsibilities adequately, which also impinges on research, teaching and professional development.

6. Discussion

The increasing demand for high quality teaching and learning outcomes, and the link to Government funding, have highlighted the importance of the course coordinator role. The results of this single site survey, and the supporting literature, suggest that Universities cannot be complacent about the recruitment, development and support that is needed for this critical leadership role. CCs need professional development opportunities to build their leadership and course management competencies. As discipline specific specialists, they often lack these competencies when they move into this leadership role.

While the results are for a single Australian Technology Network institution, the literature indicates that the CC role is a difficult one. As noted in the literature review, leading a team of people, building a positive culture and managing pedagogical changes are inherent in this role. The results for this one institution, and the developmental needs of this cohort of CCs appear to align with this notion of leadership and suggest that senior leadership must pay heed to the developmental requirements of this important group in the quality cycle. Because of this organisation's 'applied' focus, there may be added pressures on the CC role given the external pressure that is applied by accreditation bodies.

The need for leadership development and an understanding of pedagogy was clearly identified in the survey. Strategies such as mentoring and coaching, opportunities for rich feedback such as 360 assessments, and opportunities for discussion and sharing of information have been suggested by Bolden et al. (2006) and Raines (2003) to promote academic leadership development.

Undergraduate CCs appear to have more pressing needs for development than post-graduate coordinators. Similarly, individuals new into the role were more emphatic about their developmental needs. This illustrates the need for universities to put into place induction programs which support and develop these individuals. Clear role statements, with appropriate loadings are also needed.

Women indicated more of a pressing need for development and support in implementing pedagogical practices whereas men emphasized the need for more leadership skill development. There were also a small group of more tenured course coordinators with 11 or more years who indicated a strong need for development. Why these trends have manifested is interesting and further investigation into this pattern of responses is needed.

Workload issues are also of major concern with information suggesting that administrative burdens are increasing rather than decreasing in Universities. Student demands are also increasing. Managing complex data systems and reporting requirements are also problematic for the CCs.

The value of these positions on student teaching and course quality has been noted in the literature which suggests that sound academic leadership improves student learning (Gibbs, 2006; Martin et al., 2003; Prosser & Trigwell, 1997; Ramsden, 1998) Given this importance, the role needs greater consideration in promotion systems, which are heavily biased towards research and teaching.

The needs of CCs identified in this study support those competencies identified by Ramsden (1998). Clearly CCs need development in leadership, course design, building team performance and supporting students in order to facilitate high quality course experiences. Heads of Schools and university staff development officers need to be aware of CC needs for professional development. Academic developers must also consider the time poor nature of these positions when considering the design and delivery of professional development programs.

What does this mean in real terms? University leadership must consider this role and its specific job requirements and develop clear role descriptions. Leadership development programs must be put into place to support these individuals and to develop future course coordinators. Time to engage in development programs and to situate the learning in practice must also take place by ensuring balance in workload. University data systems must provide reliable, accurate and timely information in order for the CC to manage course quality and future direction. Lastly, promotion systems must look at this role and consider its merit in decisions related to career laddering and advancement.

7. Conclusion

The push for measurable indices of course quality with links to government funding are elevating the importance of the course coordinator role. Management needs to consider the developmental needs of this critical operational cohort in the higher education setting and begin to place greater value on this role from a rewards and promotion perspective, developmental needs perspective, and also budget and plan accordingly for the demanding and time intensive nature of these positions.

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